

DECISIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT

Parole dispute shows challenge

The heated exchange between the chairman of the state parole board and the attorney general this week underscores again the inherent difficulties of the parole board's job. Although some parole decisions may be easy to make, some also are much more difficult and demand more from board members, who must set aside emotions and take clear-eyed looks at the cases.

Attorney General Troy King used some unusually strong language in his dispute with parole board

Clear-eyed

The state parole board must consider cases with a clear-eyed look, unswayed by emotion.

Chairman Don McGriff — like King an appointee of Gov. Bob Riley. The case before the parole board was that of Melanie Lowery, a Gadsden woman serving a 30-year sentence for the murder of her husband. She has been in prison for almost 14 years.

There are no issues of guilt or innocence here. The actions of Melanie Lowery are not in dispute. She pleaded guilty to shooting her husband three times in the back of the head as he slept. (Her son burned, dismembered and disposed of the body and served time in a juvenile facility for his part in the case.)

She claims that her husband's abuse of her and her children led her to kill him. Prosecutors cite a sizable life insurance policy as her motivation.

The case had largely faded from public memory until the parole board voted 2-1 in August to release Lowery. That prompted a number of protests and calls from Riley and several legislators for the board to reconsider the case. It did so this week and reversed its decision, voting 3-0 to rescind her parole.

The decision came amid no small degree of tension, as evidenced by the words of King and McGriff.

King objected to the chairman's allowing testimony of alleged abuse by Lowery's husband, which he called "character assassination of the dead."

"General King, do you think we should make a political decision?" McGriff replied. McGriff later had an exchange with the district attorney in the case, who argued that Lowery's petition for parole was based on "rumor, slander and innuendo."

King was pleased with the board's eventual decision — and anything but pleased with McGriff. "The chairman of the board acted inappropriately today," he said. "He began to advocate for Melanie Lowery."

That's a serious charge, but not an implausible one. Parole requests must be evaluated carefully. The board is not charged with finding reasons to release inmates.

McGriff and his fellow board members have a tough job, but the difficulty of the decision can never excuse a failure to responsibly consider cases within the context of the board's responsibilities.

Inmate center sought

By SAMIRA JAFARI

The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY — After seeing a transition center for female prisoners "show progress," the state parole board asked legislators Friday to fund a similar center for male inmates to ease crowding and prepare them for release.

The purpose of transition centers is to help parolees, especially those with substance abuse problems, return to society after extensive counseling and job training. William Segrest, executive director of the board, said most inmates graduate from the program in four months but are not allowed to leave the center until approved by the parole board.

The state prison system is at double capacity with nearly 24,000 prisoners, making any other transition center a major

priority, he told legislators at a budget hearing. The state attempted to alleviate crowding by paroling 4,110 inmates through a special docket and second parole panel. However, Segrest said, the parole board has considered all the nonviolent offenders under that docket and there's still a backlog of state prisoners at county jails.

A transition center would target inmates who aren't immediately eligible for parole but who would be after completing the program. The women's center now has 157 inmates and has had 148 women successfully complete the program since it opened in April. A men's center would likely be built at an abandoned mental health hospital in Thomasville that could house up to 315 inmates, Segrest told lawmakers at a budget hearing.

IN ADDITION TO PUNISHMENT